

Just Go!
Gen. 12:1-9
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One of my favorite books growing up was a Dr. Seuss book called "On Beyond Zebra." Are you familiar with this one? I think I liked it so much as a kid because it painted a picture of what I think most kids already know: There's a world beyond what we see and touch and experience. There's the possibility of something more than what this life has to offer. Part of the book goes like this:

Said Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell,
My very young friend who is learning to spell:
"The A is for Ape. And the B is for Bear.
The C is for Camel. The H is for Hare.
The M is for Mouse. And the R is for Rat.
I know *all* the twenty-six letters like that...

"...through to Z is for Zebra. I know them all well."
Said Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell.
"So now I know everything *any*one knows
From beginning to end. From the start to the close.
Because Z is as far as the alphabet goes."

Then he almost fell flat on his face on the floor
When I picked up the chalk and drew one letter more!
A letter he never had dreamed of before!
And I said, "*You* can stop, if you want, with the Z
Because most people stop with the Z
But not me!"

The teacher goes on to introduce little Conrad to a whole new world that he'd never imagined before. He introduces letters like Glick and Snee and Thnad, and characters such as Sneedles and Nutches and Floob-Boober-Bab-Boober-Bubs. Nothing cracks a kid up like saying Floob-Boober-Bab-Boober-Bubs.

As Abraham found out, God also does not stop at the Z, but that didn't stop Abraham from following God. It's not an exaggeration to say this story from Genesis is one of the most important stories in the history of the world. In fact, it's not only important for us as Christians, but Jews and Muslims also claim Abraham and his story as their own.

In his wonderful book on Abraham, Bruce Feiler talks about Abraham's universal application. He says, "He is the great patriarch of the Hebrew Bible, the spiritual forefather of the New Testament, and the grand holy architect of the Koran. He is the shared ancestor of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He is the linchpin in the Arab-Israeli conflict. He is the centerpiece of the battle between the West and Islamic extremists. He

is the father of 12 million Jews, two billion Christians, and one billion Muslims around the world. And yet he is largely unknown.”

Feiler is right in that there isn't a lot we know about Abraham, at least compared to other patriarchs like Jacob and Moses. However, there are a few things we do know. If we back up to Ch. 11 in Genesis, we get the story of the Tower of Babel, where humans foolishly tried to build a tower to reach up to God. Then you have a genealogy that leads from Noah's son Shem to Abraham, and the story of Terah, Abraham's father.

Interestingly, in the midst of that story we are told that Sarah, Abraham's wife, is barren.

So at the end of Ch. 11, we know that Abraham is the end of the line as far as the genealogy goes, and unless something changes, he's the end of the line period. His wife is not going to give him a son. There is no future. Abraham and Sarah have no potential to continue their lineage. It's like when I was searching for a church camp out near Princeton, Ill., and my GPS unit led me down a dead-end road. I got to the end of the road and looked out into this cornfield and my GPS said, "Your destination is ahead." And I shouted at it, "No it's not!" I was stuck at a dead end, just like Abraham and Sarah.

I think God must love dead ends, because it gives God a chance to turn our world upside down. Moses led the Israelites to the shores of the Red Sea, but couldn't get across. Dead end. Jesus, the supposed Messiah gets crucified and buried in a tomb. Dead end. Abraham and Sarah, who are supposed to be fruitful and multiply, are burdened with barrenness. Dead end.

That leads us to Ch. 12, when God speaks to Abraham and promises him two things: God promises to lead him to a new land and to make him a great nation. Sounds wonderful, but there's two small problems. First, Abraham already had a place to live, and second, you can't have a great nation without some offspring. Dead end.

Up until this point in Genesis, God has been dealing with a stubborn humanity who keep trying to be more than who they were created to be. Adam and Eve take a bite of the fruit, hoping to be more like God. Humanity grows increasingly wicked, forcing God to respond with the flood. The builders of the tower of Babel attempt to make a name for themselves by putting themselves on the same level as God.

That's what makes Abraham so appealing to God and to us: He's not God, and he knows it. In a story about creation, he can't create. In a story where others are trying to make a name for themselves, God tells Abraham that God will make Abraham's name great. God comes to Abraham and without giving any destination or traveling instructions, simply says, "Go." And Abraham goes. What kind of person does this? And what kind of God asks for it?

Would you have gone? I would like to say "yes," but to be honest, I'm pretty comfortable and settled right here. And I'm sure Abraham was, too. Moving for him involved not just uprooting his family but moving his livestock and business and workers. It also meant leaving behind his hometown and family and friends. To be followers of God, there are often things we are called to leave behind.

Why did Abraham go? I think it was because God said, "Go to the land I will show you." There's a major difference between a travel agent and a tour guide. A travel agent will help plan your trip, book your travel, find hotels, but when it's time to leave, your travel agent says "Bon Voyage" and stays behind.

But a tour guide goes with you. A tour guide knows all the sights to see and places to avoid and tips and tricks and shortcuts. If you get stranded in a strange land, a

travel agent is nowhere to be found, but a tour guide is right there with you. So, knowing God is with him, Abraham just goes.

Really, what choice did he have? The only other option was to stay put and grow old. We are all vulnerable to the feelings of complacency and stagnation. The metaphor of the life of faith as a journey is a challenge to our modern ideologies which yearn for settlement, security, and placement. And yet, if we stay put too long spiritually, we begin to think that God stays put, too. If we are too comfortable, too secure, or too into having control, we may find ourselves at a dead end, and we will not be willing to trust God when the call comes.

Because who knows what's out there beyond Zebra? Sure, God knows, but we don't, and that's more important, because if we let someone else do the driving, we don't control where we are going. It's like the bumper sticker that said, "I took the road less traveled – now where the heck am I?" Isn't it easier to stay put, even if it's not the best place in the world, than to risk following God?

This notion of following doesn't have to be geographical, although for Abraham it was. Because we are called to be followers, I believe God calls fixed people on a pilgrimage and rut-dwellers down new roads. I believe God calls us to leave a certain situation so God can bring us into another, better situation. And that can be painful, can't it, because there's always something we have to leave behind when we go, and there's no iron-clad guarantee that everything will be all right. Sometimes it's safer to stay in the dead end than to leave the GPS behind and venture down unknown roads.

But we are not called to live dead end lives, and God promises not to leave us there, if we are willing to follow. What is guaranteed is that God will be with us on the journey. And our trust is rewarded with the rich experience of traveling with God through the mountains and valleys of life. The road is never easy, and there will surely be pain along your journey, but what other choice do you have? Sure, we can stay put, but is that all there is to life, just staying put? Or is there something more to be found on beyond Zebra?

I want to end with these words from Walt Whitman. They are the closing lines of his poem, "Passage to India," and capture what God called Abraham to do, and what I believe God calls us to do:

Sail forth! steer for the deep waters only!
Reckless, O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me;
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.
O my brave soul!
O farther, farther sail!
O daring joy, but safe! Are they not all the seas of God?
O farther, farther, farther sail!